

The Right to Mental Health Amidst Conflict in Yemen

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Yemeni civilians daily face violations of every civil, political, and socio-economic right. The war has led to the world's largest food security emergency, with 14 million people—half the country's population—facing starvation. More than 2 million have been displaced from their homes. The war has destroyed the country's economy and its basic public services, and many public servants have not been paid their salaries. Thousands of civilians have been killed or injured during the conflict, with the warring parties committing many war crimes and violations of human rights and humanitarian law, including through arbitrary detention, port closures, air strikes, landmine use, and harassment and threats to journalists and human rights defenders. Many Yemenis have lost loved ones in the conflict and live with great fear and suffering.

Exposure to these many harms can lead to a mental health crisis, largely invisible outside Yemen, but with serious and long-term harms to the lives of Yemenis. The intense stress which Yemenis live under, and the extensive trauma to which they are exposed, risks causing high rates of anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

I have been part of a team studying mental health in Yemen. What we have found so far is alarming. For example, I conducted a study on school children in Sana'a, and found that 79 % reported PTSD symptoms. Many children reported having nightmares and difficulty concentrating in class. Yemeni health experts reported a 40% increase in the suicide rate in Sana'a between 2014 and 2015, and an increase in psychiatric patients.

Poor mental health can have far-reaching consequences. Research on other conflicts makes clear that, left untreated, poor mental health resulting from war can affect family relationships, physical health, domestic violence rates, education, the ability to work, and, in some circumstances, even support for peaceful measures to end conflict.

Despite the likely severity of the mental health crisis, health services in Yemen are minimal, and little action is being taken by the government or the international community to mitigate and respond to the clear risk. Even before the current war, Yemen experienced poor mental health conditions. The ongoing war has increased the breadth and depth of trauma, and existing public health services have been further devastated by the country's current state and public institutional breakdown.

In Yemen, mental health care is not integrated into the primary health care system. There are limited facilities, and a lack of trained mental health professionals. There is no official protocol, or standardized guidance for mental health diagnosis and assessments which are relevant to a Yemeni social and cultural context. While the Government of Yemen introduced a National Mental Health Strategy for 2011-2015, economic crisis and the war led to its suspension. There is currently no law in Yemen that addresses mental health. There are no figures available for current expenditure on mental health by the Ministry of Public Health. According to the WHO, more than half of all health facilities in Yemen have closed or are only partially functioning. For

a population of 28 million, there are only 40 psychiatrists, and 4 specialized hospitals. Many Yemenis are unable to access mental health treatment when they first seek healthcare. Medication is scarce, and when available, is highly expensive. Mental health services in Yemen are insufficient to provide psychological health services for children suffering from distress as well as for women, children, teenagers, older persons and those who are suffering from chronic conditions.

Under international human rights law, everyone has the right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States have a duty to respect, protect, and fulfill the right to mental health. This includes refraining from interfering with everyone's right to access mental health care, preventing and redressing interferences with the right by third parties, and taking positive measures to provide mental health care facilities, goods, and services. The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights' General Comment 14 explains that the right to mental health requires that mental health care goods, facilities, and services be available, accessible, acceptable, of good quality, and non-discriminatory.

It is unclear what steps the Government of Yemen is taking to ensure that its citizens have access to mental health care support, or what plans are in place to address the mental health needs of Yemenis immediately and through the long-term.

We recommend that states make the following recommendations to the government of Yemen to advance the right to mental health:

1. The Government of Yemen should integrate mental health in its national planning, create a national mental health policy, and ensure sufficient budget is allocated to mental health services.
2. The Government of Yemen, with support from UN agencies, donor governments, and non-governmental organizations, should promote access to psychosocial support, including by training more mental health service providers.
3. The Government of Yemen should immediately make all efforts to reduce the burden of the conflict on Yemenis, including by paying public sector salaries to all areas in Yemen, by reopening Sana'a Airport, and by lifting unnecessary import restrictions.
4. Parties to the conflict, the UN Special Envoy, and the international community should ensure that mental health is taken into account during peace and transitional justice processes.